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C O N F I D E N T I A L TBILISI 001809

SIPDIS

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TAGS: PGOV PREL RS GG
SUBJECT: GEORGIA: MR. LAVROV COMES TO GEORGIA

REF: A. TBILISI 1786
 1B. MOSCOW 2518
 1C. TBILISI 1772

Classified By: CHARGE D'AFFAIRES A.I. KENT LOGSDON FOR REASONS 1.4 (B) AND (D).

11. (SBU) Summary. Russian Foreign Minister Lavrov visited Abkhazia during the first week of October, reportedly to sign an agreement on visa-free travel, discuss bilateral relations and confer about the results of the latest Geneva talks. Lavrov's schedule, as publicly released, included meetings with de facto Abkhaz "president" Sergey Bagapsh and de facto Abkhaz "foreign minister" Sergey Shamba. In his public comments, Lavrov repeated Russia's request for U.S. visas for Abkhaz de facto authorities to attend meetings at the UN and stated his intention to clarify U.S. intentions with regards to visa applications by the de factos. The Georgian MFA issued a statement on October 3 denouncing the visit for violating Georgia's territorial integrity. End summary.

12. (C) Comment. It is important to note that reports of the visit to Georgia are available only from the press, since embassy officers have infrequent access to Abkhazia. Nonetheless, it is clear that visits to Abkhazia and South Ossetia by senior Russian officials, without permission from Georgia, are highly provocative, revealing continuing disregard for international law. Lavrov's visit was the first since the release of the Tagliavini report (ref A). Russia's statements regarding the report have focused on allegations that Georgia triggered the war (ref B), but Georgia's statement on Lavrov's visit highlighted an equally important finding of the report - that Russia's recognition of the regions as independent has no justification in international law. The signing of a visa-free agreement with de facto Abkhaz authorities adds another element to Russia's degradation of Georgia's territorial integrity. Lavrov's decision to raise publicly Russia's request for U.S. visas for Abkhaz de facto authorities reveals the seriousness of Russia's plans to pursue the issue. End comment.

A VISA-FREE REGIME

13. (SBU) On October 2 in Sukhumi, Russian and de facto Abkhaz authorities signed an agreement on visa exemptions for Russian and Abkhaz "citizens" who reside in Abkhazia. According to Georgian press reports, even people without passports will be able to cross the Russian border. De facto Abkhaz authorities noted that this agreement will strengthen the legal basis of Russian-Abkhaz relations and increase people-to-people exchanges. The agreement will be applied temporarily after 30 days and will take permanent effect after ratification by both parties. During press remarks in Sukhumi, Lavrov also spoke about Russia's request for U.S. visas for Abkhaz de facto authorities to visit the UN (ref C). He noted that "previously, requests got swallowed by bureaucratic replies, but we will seek clarity in this position of the U.S. as the state that houses the UN

headquarters."

OTHER ELEMENTS OF THE VISIT

¶ 14. (SBU) According to the website of Abkhaz de facto authorities (www.abkhaziagov.org), Lavrov laid a wreath in Glory Park at the monument for Abkhaz soldiers killed in the 1992-1993 conflict and visited Abkhaz State University. He also planned to have meetings with Russian border guard officials and leadership of a Russian military base.

¶ 15. (SBU) In a parallel development, Georgian press reported that on the day before Lavrov's visit, the last remnants of the UNOMIG staff departed UNOMIG's compound in Gali for the final time. As reported by the Georgian press, the day of the visit, representatives of the Russian General Staff moved in and took over the compound.

GEORGIAN MFA RESPONDS

¶ 16. (SBU) The Georgian Ministry of Foreign Affairs issued a statement (www.mfa.gov.ge) condemning Lavrov's visit to Sukhumi. The statement cited the Tagliavini report's finding that "South Ossetia and Abkhazia had no right to separate from Georgia and that their recognition as independent states by any third country contradicts norms and principles of international law" (ref C). According to the Georgian MFA, Lavrov's visit confirms yet again that Russia has no intention of following principles of international law, and terms the visit another example of the "long chain of criminal acts of the Kremlin."

LOGSDON